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PHOTOS BY AP

Michelson embraces Vogel after her return to East Germany: Was it a fair trade?

ESPIONAGE

Swapping Spies in Berlin

Several men got out of a van one day last week and walked across the Glienicke Bridge on the outskirts of West Berlin. At the other end—in East Germany—a Soviet flag snapped in the cool wind. One of the men, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Burt, boarded a waiting bus. He told the 23 solemn-faced passengers, most of them Germans, that he had come as the representative of the president of the United States, Ronald Reagan. They broke into broad smiles and applauded.

An hour later the bus started slowly across the bridge. As soon as it left East German territory, a van that had been parked in the allied sector backed up to the middle of the bridge. The van's doors opened and out stepped two East Germans, a Pole and a Bulgarian, as well as a clutch of U.S. marshals. The four East Europeans walked the remainder of the way to the communist side—where they joyfully embraced waiting officials.

With that, East and West completed the biggest spy swap since the end of World War II. It wasn't quite clear who came out ahead in the deal. Washington released four Soviet-bloc spies who had been imprisoned for espionage in the United States. The West got back 25 intelligence agents—none of them American citizens—who had been jailed in East Germany and Poland on charges of spying. (Two of the 25 agents remained temporarily in East Germany.) In West Germany, one newspaper dismissed the exchange with the headline 23 LITTLE FISH AGAINST FOUR BIGGIES. The Reagan administration saw it otherwise. "We drove a very hard bargain," said a senior official in Washington. "There's not a lot of enthusiasm in the U.S. government for spy exchanges unless you get a good bargain, and we got one."

The United States did not get as much as it wanted, however. During the course of three years of secret negotiations, American officials tried to obtain the release of Soviet dissident Anatoly Shcharansky and to win a promise of better treatment for Andrei Sakharov as part of the deal. The answer from Moscow was "no." Beyond that, authorities in Washington and Bonn remained silent on the role the 25 Western intelligence agents had played in ferreting out Warsaw Pact secrets. Several of them were serving life sentences in East Germany and Poland.

Of the four East-bloc spies released on the Glienicke Bridge, the most prominent was Alfred Zehe, a respected East German physicist and former professor at the University of Dresden. He had been arrested in Boston in 1983, where he pleaded guilty to charges of buying secret U.S. documents; he had been serving an eight-year prison term. The others were Marian Zacharski, a Pole who was sentenced to life in prison in 1981 for conspiring with a Hughes Aircraft Co. radar engineer to deliver filmed documents on major U.S. weapons systems to Polish agents in Europe; Alice Michelson, a 67-year-old East German grandmother serving a 10-year sentence (she had been arrested last year trying to smuggle a tape of classified military information out of the United States in a pack of cigarettes), and Penyu Baychev Kostadinov, a Bulgarian businessman arrested in 1983 for receiving documents containing nuclear-energy secrets.

Moscow's Blessing: American officials confirmed that the East Germans had initiated the negotiations and had kept them going because of their desire to obtain the release of Zehe. Although no Soviets were involved in the trade, Moscow monitored the negotiations closely and presumably gave its blessing to the final results. The talks were conducted largely through the intermediary of Wolfgang Vogel, a noted East German lawyer who has been involved in the negotiations for a number of previous spy exchanges. Vogel's most famous case: the exchange of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Soviet master spy Rudolf Abel in 1962—a swap carried out on the same Glienicke Bridge. (Last week, in a development apparently unrelated to the latest spy exchange, Moscow announced that it was expelling a U.S. Embassy political officer, Paul M. Stombaugh, for allegedly engaging in espionage in the Soviet Union. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow declined to comment on the matter; Stombaugh told correspondents that he was unaware of the expulsion order.)

Administration officials thought hard about releasing four Soviet-bloc spies in the middle of the scandal over the Walker family's alleged sale of U.S. Navy secrets to the Russians. But they decided that the two cases were unrelated and that, as one official put it, "humanitarian considerations clearly outweighed any advantage we might have gained by keeping these four persons in prison." That said, officials emphasized that the swap did not mean that Washington was easing up in its efforts to combat espionage, nor did it signify any sudden easing in East-West relations. While both sides had agreed to an exchange—both meant to go right on spying on each other.

Vogel (center), Burt (right): 'A very hard bargain'

ANGUS DEMING with DEBBIE SEWARD in Bonn and ZOFIA SMARDZ in Washington